

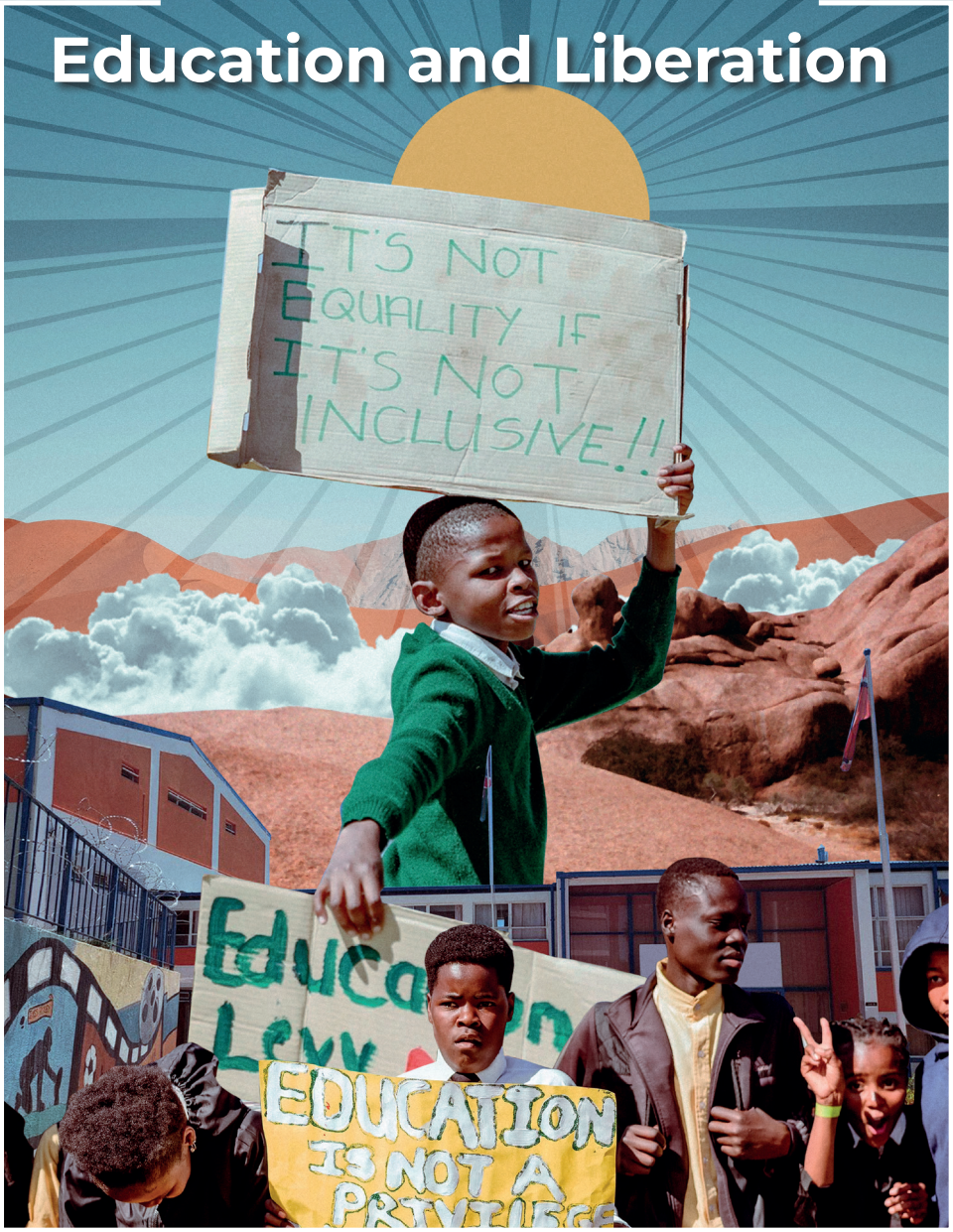
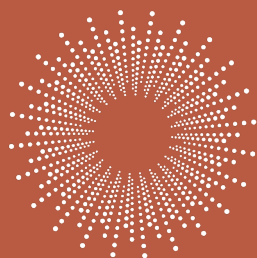


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Decolonising Early Childhood Development in Informal Settlements: A Case Study of New Elementary Namibia and the Implementation of the Sixth National Development Plan

Kevin Wessels

Introduction

Early childhood development (ECD) plays a critical role in advancing equity and social justice in Namibia, particularly within the informal settlements of Windhoek where poverty, overcrowding, and historical inequalities continue to shape children's educational experiences. This case study examines the work of New Elementary (NE), a Namibian non-governmental organisation operating in informal settlements, to explore how decolonising approaches to ECD can support the objectives of Namibia's Sixth National Development Plan (NDP6) while addressing structural inequalities. The study explores the gap between national targets and lived realities on the ground.

Drawing on observations, interviews with educators, and engagement with community stakeholders, the study highlights the tensions between formal curriculum expectations and culturally responsive, community-based practices. It illustrates how overcrowded classrooms, underqualified teachers,

limited stipends, food insecurity, and inadequate infrastructure continue to constrain ECD service delivery. At the same time, it demonstrates how NE integrates play-based learning, story-telling, indigenous knowledge systems, and strong community participation to foster learner agency, cultural identity, and holistic development.

By situating NE's practices within the targets and indicators of NDP6,



Early childhood development faces numerous challenges in informal settlements.

Source: Kevin Wessels

particularly those focused on access, quality, and school readiness, this study puts forward the view that decolonising ECD is not only a pedagogical shift, but also a developmental necessity. It argues that decolonisation, in this context, should recognise local knowledge, and affirm children's identities, while striving to transform ECD centres into spaces of dignity and empowerment. The case study concludes that meaningful implementation of NDP6 requires investment in infrastructure and increased enrolment, as well as culturally grounded, community-driven models to advance access, equality, participation and social justice in Namibia's most marginalised communities.

Background

ECD is widely recognised as a critical foundation for lifelong learning, social participation, and economic inclusion (Britto et al., 2017; UNICEF, 2019). Research consistently demonstrates that early investment in children's cognitive, emotional, and physical development yields long-term benefits for individuals and societies alike (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007). In Namibia, this recognition is reflected in NDP6, which positions ECD as a strategic priority under its broader goal of strengthening human capital and reducing inequality (of Namibia, 2023).

NDP6 commits Namibia to increasing ECD enrolment, improving

infrastructure, strengthening the ECD workforce, and reducing disparities in access, particularly for vulnerable populations. However, these ambitions exist alongside persistent inequalities, especially in Windhoek's informal settlements, where access to quality ECD remains limited and uneven (UN-Habitat, 2020). Children in these areas often learn in overcrowded classrooms, informal structures, and under-resourced centres, supported by facilitators who receive minimal stipends and limited professional recognition (UNICEF Namibia, 2019).

Namibia's ECD landscape is deeply shaped by its colonial and apartheid past. Under South African administration, education systems were deliberately structured to exclude indigenous populations from meaningful access to learning opportunities, particularly in early childhood (Amukugo, 2013). Early education was neither prioritised nor adequately funded for Black Namibians, with caregiving and early learning largely confined to households and communities.

Following independence in 1990, the Namibian government made significant strides in expanding access to basic education. However, ECD remained marginal within national education planning for many years, often treated as a social welfare issue rather than a core component of development (Shikalepo,

2019). This neglect disproportionately affected low-income and marginalised communities, particularly those living in informal settlements.

Windhoek's informal settlements have grown rapidly due to rural-to-urban migration, unemployment, and a chronic shortage of affordable housing (Huchzermeyer, 2011). These settlements are characterised by insecure tenure, limited access to services, and overcrowding. Within this context, ECD centres often emerge organically as community responses to childcare and early learning needs. They are typically established by women caregivers who convert informal structures, backyard rooms, or corrugated iron shacks into learning spaces.

NDP6 represents an important policy shift by explicitly identifying ECD as a development priority. Key targets include increasing ECD enrolment for children aged 0–5, expanding access to safe and appropriate infrastructure, improving quality through trained practitioners, and reducing inequality in access across socioeconomic groups (Republic of Namibia, 2023). However, these targets largely assume formalised centres with stable infrastructure and regulatory compliance. Despite serving the most vulnerable children, informal settlement ECD centres often fall outside these assumptions and remain marginal to implementation strategies.

NE Namibia operates within this policy–practice gap. The organisation focuses on rehabilitating and rebuilding ECD centres in informal settlements, while promoting learner-centred, culturally relevant approaches to early learning. NE's work challenges dominant models of ECD delivery by foregrounding community participation, indigenous knowledge, and contextual responsiveness.

Colonial Legacies, Urban Informality, and ECD

The marginalisation of ECD in informal settlements must also be understood through Namibia's colonial spatial planning. Apartheid-era urban design deliberately excluded Black Namibians from serviced urban areas, producing overcrowded townships and, later, informal settlements that persist today (Huchzermeyer, 2011). These spatial inequalities continue to shape access to public services, including early childhood education.

Informal settlements are frequently characterised as “temporary” or “illegal,” despite housing a significant and growing proportion of Windhoek's population. This framing has direct consequences for ECD provision. Because ECD centres in these areas operate outside formal planning frameworks, they are often excluded from infrastructure investment, monitoring systems, and development

funding (UN-Habitat, 2020). As a result, early learning in informal settlements remains invisible within many policy implementation processes, even when policy documents such as NDP6 explicitly prioritise vulnerable children.

Furthermore, dominant ECD models in Namibia remain rooted in Western developmental frameworks that privilege formal classrooms, standardised curricula, and English-language instruction. These models often fail to recognise indigenous child-rearing practices, communal learning, storytelling, and play as legitimate forms of early education. In informal settlements, where community-based knowledge systems remain strong, this disconnect contributes to the perception that local ECD centres are “deficient”, rather than differently structured (Smith, 2012). NE Namibia’s work challenges this deficit framing by treating informal ECD centres as sites of knowledge, care, and resilience, rather than policy problems to be corrected.

Challenges Faced by ECD Actors in Informal Settlements

Inadequate infrastructure and overcrowding

One of the most pressing challenges facing ECD centres in informal settlements is inadequate infrastructure.

Many centres operate in unsafe, poorly ventilated structures without proper sanitation, electricity, or access to clean water. Overcrowded classrooms are common, with child-to-facilitator ratios far exceeding recommended standards. This limits opportunities for play-based learning, individual attention, and inclusive practices, directly undermining early development outcomes (Urban et al., 2012).

Precarity of the ECD workforce

NDP6 identifies trained and competent ECD practitioners as a key indicator of quality. In practice, facilitators in informal settlements often receive extremely low and irregular stipends, sometimes dependent on parental contributions that fluctuate due to poverty and unemployment. Many facilitators are described as “underqualified,” despite years of experience, because they lack access to formal training pathways. This reflects the broader devaluation of care work, which is highly feminised and structurally undervalued (ILO, 2018; UN Women, 2021).

Stipend challenges and lack of professional recognition

An ECD teacher noted the following:

Many people think early childhood teaching is easy because the

children are small. They do not see the planning, preparation, and patience required. We are expected to follow curriculum guidelines, assess learners, and prepare them for primary school, but we are not always given the same professional recognition as primary or secondary school teachers.

The stipend is very low compared to the responsibilities we carry. Sometimes it feels like our work is undervalued because we are working with small children. Some teachers leave because they cannot survive on the income. This creates instability for the children. If ECD is truly the foundation of education, then the government and stakeholders must invest properly in the teachers who build that foundation.

(ECD teacher, personal communication)

Hunger, malnutrition, and learning outcomes

Hunger remains a persistent barrier to learning in informal settlement ECD centres. Children frequently arrive without having eaten, affecting concentration, emotional regulation, and participation (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007). While NDP6 links early learning outcomes to nutrition and health, feeding schemes remain inconsistent and heavily dependent on donor

support or community contributions. This undermines children's readiness for formal schooling and contradicts national development objectives.

Policy exclusion and administrative barriers

Although NDP6 aims to reduce inequality in access to ECD, informal centres often struggle to meet registration and compliance requirements. This exclusion limits access to subsidies, training opportunities, and state-supported feeding programmes. As a result, the very centres serving the most vulnerable children remain structurally marginalised (Republic of Namibia, 2023).

Gendered care labour and the political economy of ECD

ECD provision in informal settlements is overwhelmingly sustained by women. Facilitators, caregivers, and centre founders are often mothers and grandmothers who step into care roles in response to community need rather than formal employment opportunities. Despite their central role in human development, their labour is poorly remunerated and largely unrecognised within national development frameworks.

Low stipends not only affect facilitators' livelihoods, but also undermine

the sustainability of ECD centres. Facilitators frequently leave for domestic work or informal trading opportunities that offer slightly higher or more stable income. This high turnover disrupts learning continuity and weakens relationships between children and caregivers, an essential component of ECD (Freire, 1970/2007; Smith, 2012).

NDP6 recognises the importance of human capital development, but does not sufficiently address the gendered nature of ECD labour. Without targeted interventions to professionalise, remunerate, and support ECD facilitators in informal settlements, national quality indicator targets remain difficult to achieve.

A female ECD teacher, reflecting on care work, income insecurity, and emotional labour, noted:

Working in early childhood is more than just teaching letters and numbers. We are mothers, nurses, counsellors, and sometimes even social workers. Many of the children come to school hungry or upset because of situations at home. We must comfort them before we can even begin teaching. It is emotional work. When a child cries, you carry that with you even after school. ...

The hardest part is that this work is not always recognised as

professional work. Our stipends are small and sometimes delayed. There are months when I worry about how I will pay rent or support my own children. Yet every day I come back because I know how important these early years are. We do this work with love, but love does not pay the bills. I hope one day ECD facilitators will be recognised and supported like other teachers in the education system. (ECD teacher, personal communication)

Structural hunger and the limits of learning

Hunger in informal settlements is structural, not incidental. High unemployment, food price inflation, and household poverty mean that many children rely on ECD centres as their primary sources of daily nutrition (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007; UNICEF, 2019). When feeding schemes fail, learning is directly compromised.

Facilitators report that children who are hungry struggle to engage in structured activities, become easily distressed, or fall asleep during lessons (UNICEF Namibia, 2019). These realities contradict assumptions embedded in policy frameworks that children arrive at learning spaces with basic needs met. Although NDP6 links nutrition to educational outcomes, implementation remains fragmented, leaving ECD

centres to absorb the consequences of broader socioeconomic failures.

Actions Taken to Address the Challenges

New Elementary Namibia's interventions

NE addresses these challenges through community-driven and context-responsive interventions. The organisation rehabilitates and rebuilds ECD centres using participatory design processes and local labour, directly contributing to NDP6's infrastructure targets (Republic of Namibia, 2023). Centres are designed to support play-based and learner-centred education, incorporating outdoor learning spaces, gardens, and child-friendly layouts.

NE also supports facilitators through mentorship, informal training and advocacy, recognising experiential knowledge as a valuable form of expertise. While these efforts do not replace formal accreditation, they enhance confidence, skills, and professional identity, contributing to quality improvement indicators outlined in NDP6 (ILO, 2018; UN Women, 2021).

Community and civil society engagement

When this informal settlement first started growing, there were no

proper services here. Families built their homes from corrugated iron and wood, and children had nowhere safe to stay during the day. The ECD centre began very small, as just a few children in a makeshift structure. Parents contributed what they could, sometimes just a few coins or food.

Over the years, the centre became a symbol of hope for the community. It showed that even though we are living in an informal settlement, our children deserve education and dignity. With the support from New Elementary, the centre has improved physically and academically. But its history reminds us that it was built from community effort. It represents resilience. It reminds us that development must start with the people. (NE ECD centre parent, personal communication)

Community involvement is central to sustaining ECD centres in informal settlements. Parents, elders, and volunteers contribute time, labour and indigenous knowledge, reinforcing culturally relevant learning. Civil society organisations complement these efforts through feeding schemes, training initiatives, and advocacy for improved ECD policy implementation (Banks et al., 2015).

State- and policy-level actions

At the national level, NDP6 provides a policy framework for expanding ECD access and quality. Some progress has been made in recognising ECD as a development priority, but coordination between ministries, local authorities, and informal centres remains limited. This weak alignment constrains the realisation of NDP6 targets in informal settlement contexts (Republic of Namibia, 2023).

Decolonial practice in action: Rethinking “quality” in early childhood education

NE Namibia’s approach implicitly redefines what “quality” means in early childhood education. Rather than equating quality solely with formal certification or compliance, NE emphasises relational care, cultural relevance, and community participation (Smith, 2012).

Learning environments are designed to reflect children’s lived realities, incorporating local languages, storytelling, music, and play. Gardens serve multiple functions: they support nutrition, provide learning opportunities linked to nature and responsibility, and reinforce communal values. These practices align with indigenous knowledge systems that view child development as a holistic process rather than a purely cognitive one (Freire, 1970/2007; Smith, 2012).

Such approaches challenge dominant policy metrics while advancing the spirit, if not always the letter, of NDP6’s ECD targets.

Outcomes and Results

NE-supported centres demonstrate measurable progress toward several NDP6 objectives. Improved infrastructure has created safer and more stimulating learning environments, while enrolment has increased among children who previously lacked access to ECD services. Facilitators report increased motivation, confidence, and community recognition.

However, many challenges remain unresolved. Stipends remain inadequate, nutrition support is inconsistent, and formal recognition of informal centres is limited. While NDP6 articulates ambitious goals, implementation in informal settlements remains uneven and fragmented (Republic of Namibia, 2023).

This case study demonstrates that achieving NDP6’s ECD targets requires more than policy alignment. It requires a decolonial, justice-oriented approach that recognises informal, community-based ECD centres as legitimate partners in national development (Smith, 2012; Freire, 1970/2007). Without this shift, inequalities in early childhood education will persist,

undermining both social justice and long-term development outcomes.

Assessing progress against NDP6 indicators

When assessed against NDP6 indicators, NE-supported centres demonstrate incremental but meaningful progress. Infrastructure improvements align with targets related to safe learning environments, while increased enrolment reflects expanded access for children in informal settlements. Community involvement supports participation and local ownership, key social justice principles emphasised in national development discourse (Republic of Namibia, 2023).

However, persistent gaps remain. Facilitator remuneration, access to formal training, and sustainable nutrition support continue to fall short of policy aspirations. These gaps highlight a central lesson of this case study: policy targets alone are insufficient without implementation strategies that explicitly engage informal, community-based ECD systems.

Parent reflections

Before New Elementary came, my child was learning in a small shack made of zinc sheets. When it rained, classes were sometimes cancelled, and when it was very hot, the children

could not concentrate. I was always worried that my child was not getting the kind of education that would prepare her for primary school. Since the intervention, the classrooms are safer, cleaner, and properly structured. My child now comes home excited to tell me about stories they read, the songs they sing, and the activities they do in class. I can see her confidence growing. (NE ECD parent, personal communication)

What makes me even more grateful is that the school also thinks about parents like me. I never had the chance to complete my education because of family responsibilities and financial problems. Now, in the evenings, I attend literacy classes at the same school. I am learning to read and write better, and I feel empowered. It is not just my child who is benefiting, our whole family is. The school has given us hope and dignity. (NE ECD parent, personal communication)

Conclusion

While NDP6 articulates clear goals to expand access, improve quality, and strengthen ECD systems, the lived experiences of ECD service providers reveal persistent gaps between policy and practice. NE Namibia's work highlights the transformative potential of community-driven, learner-centred approaches grounded in dignity, inclusion, and lo-

cal knowledge. At the same time, it underscores the limits of civil society interventions in the absence of sustained state investment and systemic reform.

To advance social justice in ECD requires recognising early education as a public good, valuing care labour as skilled work, and addressing the spatial inequalities that marginalise children in informal settlements. For Namibia to meaningfully meet its NDP6 commitments, ECD must be treated not as a peripheral intervention, but as a foundational pillar of equitable national development.

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